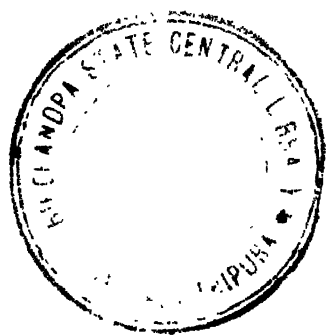


Bapsi Sidhwa

THE CROW EATERS



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*The title is borrowed from a idiom commonly used in the
sub-continent. Anyone who talks too much is said to have eaten crows.*

*This book is dedicated
to my parents
Tehmina & Peshotan Bhandara*

Author's Note

Because of a deep-rooted admiration for my diminishing community—and an enormous affection for it—this work of fiction has been a labour of love. The nature of comedy being to exaggerate, the incidents in this book do not reflect at all upon the integrity of a community whose honesty and sense of honour—not to mention its tradition of humour as typified by the Parsi *natak*—are legend. The characters drawn in this piece of pure fantasy have no relation whatever to any existing people.

I take this opportunity to thank Dr Justice Javid Iqbal and Nasira, without whose encouragement I never would have published this book in Pakistan first, and who continue to be a source of inspiration and strength. Many thanks also to Nergis Sobani, to whom I am already eternally indebted, and Esa, ever gallant, for so generously sharing her time.

It is time I acknowledged my debt to Shahnaz Rasul for the poems *Yazdi* spouts; and so blithely distorts. And for this publication by Penguin (India) I thank my friends Khushwant Singh, David Davidar and Zamir Ansari.

I would also like to thank my long-suffering husband and children, my brother Minoo for his unflagging patience and support, and my mother for the spirit in which she has accepted my writing.

BAPSI SIDHWA

Chapter I

FAREDOON Junglewalla, Freddy for short, was a strikingly handsome, dulcet-voiced adventurer with so few scruples that he not only succeeded in carving a comfortable niche in the world for himself but he also earned the respect and gratitude of his entire community. When he died at sixty-five, a majestic grey-haired patriarch, he attained the rare distinction of being locally listed in the 'Zarathusti Calendar of Great Men and Women'.

At important Parsi ceremonies, like thanksgivings and death anniversaries, names of the great departed are invoked with gratitude – they include the names of ancient Persian kings and saints, and all those who have served the community since the Parsis migrated to India.

Faredoon Junglewalla's name is invoked in all major ceremonies performed in the Punjab and Sind – an ever-present testimony to the success of his charming rascality.

In his prosperous middle years Faredoon Junglewalla was prone to reminiscence and rhetoric. Sunk in a cane-backed easy-chair after an exacting day, his long legs propped up on the sliding arms of the chair, he talked to the young people gathered at his feet:

'My children, do you know what the sweetest thing in this world is?'

'No, no, no.' Raising a benign hand to silence an avalanche of suggestions, he smiled and shook his head. 'No, it is not sugar, not money – not even mother's love!'

His seven children, and the young visitors of the evening,